

## KATYA AND THE GOAT WITH THE SILVER HOOF

By Bob Barton

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WHEN her parents died, Katya moved in with the neighbors next door. She was just six years old.

She arrived at the neighbors' cottage wearing only the clothes she had on and carrying a stray cat she had found along the way.

The neighbors had twelve children of their own. They were not happy about another mouth to feed, and they especially resented the cat eating their food as well. When they tried to get rid of the cat it snarled ferociously and lashed out with its sharp claws.

Other neighbors who pitied Katya went to visit Old Vanka who lived at the edge of the village. "You must take in the child, Vanka. Her life is none too sweet at the moment."

"What can I do for a girl? —What can I possibly teach her?" said Old Vanka. But then he thought again. "Maybe the child would bring some joy into the house. But maybe she won't want to live with a lonely old man!"

"Katya may be young but she understands what the family thinks of her. She feels it. She would probably jump at the chance to live with you," the neighbors told him.

The following day Old Vanka paid a visit to Katya. Inside the cottage he was mobbed by a gaggle of gabbling children. Beside the stove, a little girl sat stroking a cat. She looked thin, bedraggled and very unhappy.

Old Vanka nodded to the wife and asked, "Is that the orphan?"

"The same," snapped the wife. "And if it isn't enough that we have to feed her there's the cat on top of it. Mangy beast! Scratches the children. When I tried to get rid of it, it scratched me too!"

Old Vanka knelt down beside Katya. "How would you like to come and live with me?"

“Who are you?” Katya asked.

“Well, I’m a hunter of sorts,” said Old Vanka. “In summer I hunt for gold by washing sand from the river bed. In winter I hunt for the goat who lives in the woods, but I never catch sight of him.”

“Are you going to shoot him?” asked Katya.

“Oh, no! Not that one, I won’t. I want to see where he stamps his front right hoof.”

“What for?”

“Why don’t you come and live with me and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Katya was very curious about the goat, and she sensed that Old Vanka was a kind man. “I’ll come,” she said, “but I must bring my Catonaevich. She’s very good, you know.”

“I can see that. Only a fool would leave a lovely cat like that behind.”

The family gathered Katya’s few things together as quickly as they could before the old man changed his mind, and they hurried Katya, Old Vanka and the cat to the door.

So that’s how Katya, Catonaevich and Old Vanka came to live together.

Time passed very happily for the three of them. Each day Old Vanka set about his work. Each day Katya played in the cottage, and she taught herself to make soup and porridge. As for Catonaevich, she kept the cottage free of mice.

In the evenings after dinner, Old Vanka told wonderful stories. Katya, all ears, would curl up in a chair with the cat in her lap. But after every story Katya would say, “Now tell me about the goat, Vanka.”

At first Old Vanka tried to put her off. Eventually he gave in.

“He’s a very special goat, Katya. On his right forefoot he’s got a silver hoof. When he stamps that foot he leaves a jewel behind. If he stamps twice there are two, and if he paws the ground he leaves a heap of gems.”

The moment the story was out, Old Vanka was sorry he’d ever mentioned the goat. Katya had a mouthful of questions.

“What’s his name? Has he got horns? Is he big? Does he bite people? What color is he?”

“Enough, enough! So many questions. Where to begin?” cried Old Vanka. “Well, in summer he’s the color of your cat, but in winter his coat turns silver gray. I call him Silver Hoof.”

“Does he stink, Vanka?”

“Stink! Heavens, no. Farm goats stink but a wild goat smells of pine bark and bilberries and sweet, wild thyme. Now come,” said Old Vanka. “It’s time you were in bed.”

When autumn heaped leaves against the sides of the cottage, Old Vanka stopped looking for gold in the river bed and got ready to go to the woods to see where the wild goats were feeding. Katya pleaded with him to take her along. Old Vanka had to make up excuses to leave her behind.

“There’s nothing to see yet, Katya. The goats are too far away.”

In the late afternoons when Old Vanka returned, Katya would pester him with questions. “Did you see Silver Hoof, Vanka? How can you tell him from the other goats?”

“Well,” said Old Vanka, “Silver Hoof has horns the size of antlers. You can’t miss him even when he’s far off.” Katya tried to picture Silver Hoof in her mind.

Then one afternoon Old Vanka returned all excited. “Herds of wild goats are feeding about a day’s journey from here. When the snows come I will have to move deeper into the woods to get close to them.”

“But where will you stay in the woods?” asked Katya.

“I’ve got a sturdy little hut tucked among the trees,” said Old Vanka. “It’s not much but there’s a window in it and a stove. It’s very snug.”

“Will Silver Hoof feed with the other goats?” asked Katya.

“He might,” said the old man.

“Then I’m coming. Please, Vanka. I won’t make any trouble. I’ll be very quiet. Maybe Silver Hoof will come close to the hut and I’ll see him.”

“I can’t take you that deep into the woods, Katya. I have to travel on skis and you don’t know how. You’d sink into the snow and freeze to death.”

“I can learn to ski! Please, Vanka,” she begged.

In the end, Old Vanka didn’t have the heart to refuse her. “All right,” he said. “I’ll take you with me, but once we’re there you mustn’t make a fuss and ask to come home.”

When winter's breath became so cold that streams froze and snow wells formed around the boles of the trees, Old Vanka loaded a hand sled with sacks of rusks, pots of honey, tea and hunting supplies. Katya packed her doll, a hank of thread and a needle and some scraps of cloth to make a doll's dress. As an afterthought she included a rope.

"Maybe I can catch Silver Hoof with it," she told herself.

Catonaevich would have to stay behind. Katya stroked her back and talked softly into her ear.

"Old Vanka and I are going to the woods for a few days and you must guard the house against mice. When I see Silver Hoof I promise I'll tell you all about it."

The cat purred and squinted her luminous green eyes as if she were thinking of something else.

At last everything was ready and Old Vanka and Katya set off. They had scarcely got underway when there was a terrible commotion behind them. The village dogs barked and howled as if they had cornered a bear.

Katya and Old Vanka turned. Bounding down the road toward them was Catonaevich, spitting and swearing at the dogs and daring any of them to try to stop her.

Katya ran to catch her but the cat veered sharply, dashed into the woods and clawed her way up a tree. Katya and Old Vanka did everything they could to coax her down, but she wouldn't budge.

"There's nothing for it," said Old Vanka. "We'll have to leave her or we won't get to the hut before dark."

They started off again. Katya turned to say goodbye, but Catonaevich wasn't in the tree. Then Katya saw her. The cat was following them, well off to one side.

So it was that all three of them reached the hut.

Wild goats were plentiful that winter. Each day Old Vanka returned with one or two goats. Each day Old Vanka and Katya salted meat and stacked hides. Then one morning Old Vanka realized that he had far too much to take back on the sled. He'd have to make two trips. But what to do? He couldn't go back and forth with Katya and the cat, but neither could he leave them alone in the woods.

Finally Katya persuaded him that she and the cat would be perfectly fine overnight.

“What is there to be frightened of?” she asked. “I’ve got Catonaevich to keep me company and the hut is strong and warm. I won’t be scared, but please hurry back.”

Old Vanka left reluctantly.

Katya was used to being alone all day when Vanka was out hunting wild goats, but when darkness fell she started to feel uneasy. Catonaevich slept comfortably beside the stove and that made Katya feel better.

She sat down by the window and looked out at the forest. The trees, dressed like snow ghosts, stared solemnly at the little hut.

Suddenly there was a movement at the edge of the clearing. Katya strained her eyes. A goat stepped into the clearing. It had slender legs and a small head crowned with horns the size of antlers. Katya ran to the door and opened it. She found nothing there except the wind whistling a tuneless song as it shook little avalanches of snow from the branches of the trees. She closed the door and snuggled up to the cat.

“I must have been seeing things,” said Katya.

Catonaevich stared out the window. Her tail flicked back and forth.

That night thick snow fell. The wind was wild.

All the next day heavy snow leaned on the tall summer grasses, turning them into twisted tunnels where mice and shrews and gophers and moles played their deadly game of hide-and-seek. Katya felt very lonely. She stroked the cat.

“Don’t worry, cat,” she said. “Old Vanka will get here tomorrow.”

“Miaou,” the cat answered.

That evening, Katya looked out at the snowbound forest. Suddenly she jumped up. The goat with the big horns was standing quite close to the hut. Katya ran to the door, opened it and peeped out. She looked at the goat. The goat looked at Katya and raised his front forefoot. A silver hoof flashed. The goat *maaaed* and sprang into the trees.

Katya closed the door and picked up the cat. “I’ve seen him! I’ve seen Silver Hoof!” she cried. “I saw his horns and his hoof but I didn’t see him stamp and leave precious stones. He’ll do that next time. I know he will.”

The cat arched her back. Her tail thrashed back and forth.

A third day came and still Old Vanka did not appear. Katya’s face was glum. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

As darkness fell, Katya needed to cuddle with Catonaevich. The cat was nowhere to be found. Now Katya was really frightened. She pulled on her coat and boots and ran outside to look for her.

It was a full-moon night. Trees cast long narrow shadows over the cold white snow. And sitting among the shadows was Catonaevich, staring into the eyes of Silver Hoof the goat. Both animals were nodding their heads as if they were having a chat.

Then they began to chase each other backward, forward and around and around. Each time the goat paused, it stamped its silver hoof. Precious stones flashed out of the snow like sparks at first, and then they gleamed pink and blue and green and violet.

It was at that moment that Old Vanka returned. He couldn't believe the beautiful colors sparkling and winking in the snow. He stared at the cat and the goat as they cavorted all over the clearing.

Old Vanka leaned over to scoop up some of the precious stones but Katya begged him not to touch them.

“Please, Vanka. Leave them. I want to look at them like this all night.”

Sometime during the night, Katya and Old Vanka fell asleep at the window. While they slept the wind lifted the heavy blanket of snow and whirled it around in eddies.

In the morning Katya and Old Vanka hurried outside and searched the snowdrifts. The jewels were gone. Silver Hoof was gone. Catonaevich was gone, too.

So it all ended. It was a shame about Catonaevich. She was never seen again. Silver Hoof didn't come back, either.

But he had come once. And that was enough to occupy the dreams of Katya and Old Vanka for the rest of their lives.